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# **MILLENNIALS AND MEANINGFULNESS AT WORK**

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**A Research Project**

**Presented to the Faculty of**

**The George L. Graziadio**

**School of Business and Management**

**Pepperdine University**

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**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Science**

**in**

**Organization Development**

---

**by**

**Daena Lee**

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This research project, completed by

DAENA LEE

Under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The George L. Graziadio School of Business and Management in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

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## **Abstract**

Meaningfulness at work has been shown to be a positive contributor to employee engagement, performance, commitment and an extensive list of other desirable factors. The Millennial generation appears to be the largest and fastest growing generation since the Baby Boomers. Some managers have said some Millennials seem difficult to manage because their expectations of work upon entering the workforce seem so much higher than previous generations. This qualitative research project explored how Millennials at a small business find meaningfulness at work and to what extent their leaders create an environment of meaningfulness. Millennials at a small business were interviewed to explore their thoughts about meaningfulness at work. The resulting data was examined using content analysis. Mechanisms of meaning, hindrances to the perception of meaning, and pathways to meaningfulness at work were used to categorize the data. Millennials in this study appeared to find meaning at work through recognition of their competence and perceived impact, interpersonal connectedness and self-concordance. Being taken for granted and unfairness seem to be significant hindrances to the perception of meaningfulness at work for Millennials in this study. Meaningfulness at work for participant Millennials appeared to happen when their contributions had a positive perceived impact on the organization and their multi-generational coworkers.

*Keywords:* Millennials, Meaningfulness, Mechanisms of Meaning, Pathways to Meaningfulness, Unfairness

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background of the Research Project

**Meaning.** Having survived the horrors of the Holocaust, psychologist and author Victor Frankl (1959) proposed humans simply cannot survive without meaning. Meaningfulness is what makes something purposeful and significant (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Frankl quotes philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: “He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*,” (p. IX). “He or she who has a *why to work* can bear with almost any *how* as well,” state Ulrich and Ulrich (2010, Chapter 1, The Case for Meaning, para. 6). Meaningfulness can be found in virtually any setting. Since adults spend most waking hours at work, work may be a primary setting for the search for meaningfulness (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Ulrich & Ulrich, 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003).

**Meaningfulness at Work.** It is important to distinguish meaningfulness *in* work and meaningfulness *at* work. Meaningfulness in work occurs when the individual makes sense of a situation and creates meaningfulness for himself or herself (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). For example, a janitor at a hospital may find their work meaningful because of how he or she perceives how their actions support the healing of patients. Certain occupations lend themselves to perceived meaningfulness because of their contribution to the greater community, such as healing professions, law enforcement and firefighting. Meaningfulness at work may occur when organization leaders create meaningfulness through their management practices (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Ulrich & Ulrich, 2010).

“Meaning *at* work implies a relationship between the person and the organization or the workplace, in terms of commitment and engagement,” (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009, p. 198). For example, workers may perceive more meaningfulness at work because their organization has a mission that serves a higher purpose, such as fighting poverty or protecting the environment.

Pratt and Ashforth (2003) further distinguish meaningfulness *in* work versus *at* work. Organizations may be better served to engage in practices of creating meaningfulness *at* work, e.g., having a mission with a purpose beyond profit, because the level of employee engagement required to participate in such practices are at odds with practices for fostering meaningfulness *in* work, e.g., occupational continuing education may further bind the employee to their occupation but not to the organization necessarily. It seems employees who are more engaged with meaningfulness in work (think occupation) may be more easily disengaged with meaningfulness at work (think organization). Still, meaningfulness at work practices may make the work itself more meaningful as the two are not mutually exclusive. Creating meaningfulness may not only be a means of increasing performance; it may also be an end in itself (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Meaningful work and meaning at work may positively influence work motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Roberson, 1990), individual performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Wrzesniewski, 2003), absenteeism and turnover (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), job satisfaction (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), engagement (Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004), empowerment (Spreitzer, 1996), organization identification (Pratt, Rockmann, &

Kaufmann, 2006), career development (Dik, Eldridge, & Duffy, 2009), and work stress (Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010). Ulrich and Ulrich (2010) found that employees who find meaningfulness at work seem more competent, committed, and contributing. Employee competence, commitment, and sense of contribution may lead to increased customer commitment. Customer commitment may lead to better financial results for the company concluded Ulrich and Ulrich (2010). Meaningfulness has been shown in some studies to be more important to employees than pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion and working conditions (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2016). These factors may give meaning-rich workplaces a competitive advantage.

**Small Businesses.** Having a competitive advantage is likely important to many businesses, and perhaps especially for small businesses because of the substantial risk of small business failure. Statistics published by the Small Business Administration (SBA) show only about half of all employer establishments survive at least five years and only a third survive ten years or more (SBA, 2016). Nonetheless, small businesses appear to be job creators. The SBA (2017) website states:

- Small businesses provide 55% of all jobs and 66% of all net new jobs since the 1970s.
- The 600,000 plus franchised small businesses in the U.S. account for 40% of all retail sales and provide jobs for some 8 million people. Furthermore, the small business sector is growing rapidly. While corporate America has been "downsizing", the rate of small business "start-ups" has grown, and the rate for small business failures has declined.
- The number of small businesses in the United States has increased 49% since 1982.
- Since 1990, as big business eliminated 4 million jobs, small businesses added 8 million new jobs.

Small business appears to be a significant part of the U.S. economy. Small business owners employ so much of today's workforce, it seems their leaders are often ground zero for facing and dealing with workforce trends.

**Millennials.** One of those trends is the growth of what appears to be the largest generation of workers, the Millennial Generation (Rikleen, 2014). Millennials are the generation born between 1980 and 2000 (Deal & Levenson, 2016). They seem to be the fastest growing age demographic in the workplace today (Deal & Levenson, 2016). They currently make up almost half of the American workforce (Caraher, 2015). Millennials matter because they are not only different than those that have gone before, they are also more numerous (PwC, 2011).

Some research has indicated that Millennials are difficult for some managers to manage because their expectations of work are different compared to prior generations (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011; Caraher, 2015; Deal & Levenson, 2016; Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2016; Rikleen, 2014). Other studies provide evidence that Millennials expect constant feedback, a varied and interesting career and rapid progression (PwC, 2011). A PwC study (2011) concluded that Millennials tend to be ambitious, hungry to learn and move up quickly in an organization, and indicate they are willing to move on quickly if their needs are not being met. PwC (2011) advises that Millennial characteristics may require a focused response from employers.

### **Statement of the Problem and Research Questions**

Leaders seem to struggle with how to work with Millennials (Caraher, 2015). What worked in managing other generations of workers does not necessarily work with Millennials (Caraher, 2015). There appears to be a gap between what some leaders think

of Millennials and what Millennials often think of themselves. With Millennials ostensibly growing into a larger and larger portion of the workforce, leaders would do well to learn how to best manage Millennials to maximize their contributions and harness their potential. Fostering meaningfulness at work for Millennials seems to be a path to peak performance, increased productivity and employee engagement.

While there is substantive research on meaningfulness at work and on Millennials separately, there is very little on what is meaningful for Millennials at work. The purpose of this thesis and action research project was to explore how Millennials at a small business find meaningfulness at work and to what extent their leaders create an environment of meaningfulness. The questions this research intended to answer are:

1. How do Millennials find meaningfulness at work?
2. What actions do small business leaders take or fail to take that diminish or hinder a perception of meaningfulness at work for Millennials?
3. How have small business leaders been successful at fostering an environment supportive of meaningfulness at work for Millennials?

### **Significance of this Research Project**

This research project may give small business leaders insight into what Millennials find meaningful at work, and to what extent leaders contribute to or detract from the perception of meaningfulness at work. This insight may allow leaders to be more effective managing Millennials. Small business leaders could gain a competitive advantage through a more competent, committed, contributing workforce and Millennials could gain a greater sense of fulfillment at work.

**Organization of the Remainder of this Research Project**

The remainder of this research project features relevant scholarly literature regarding Millennials and what they want from work. The literature review will also highlight meaningfulness at work, how meaningfulness at work is hindered, mechanisms of meaning, and pathways to meaningfulness. Chapter Three describes the methodology used for this research project. Chapter Four covers findings of the research. Chapter Five presents key findings, provides recommendations for small business leaders, acknowledges assumptions and limitations, and concludes with suggestions for further research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of this thesis and action research project was to explore how Millennials at a small business find meaningfulness at work and to what extent their leaders create or hinder an environment of meaningfulness. The purpose of this chapter is to present literature on (1) Millennials, (2) actions small business leaders take or fail to take that hinder a perception of meaningfulness at work, and (3) how small business leaders have been successful at creating an environment supportive of meaningfulness at work.

### **About Millennials**

Born between 1980 and 2000, Millennials appear to form the largest population demographic in the US workplace (Rikleen, 2014). By 2025, it is estimated that three of every four workers across the globe will be Millennials (Rikleen, 2014). Millennials will likely be in high demand in the job market because of retiring Baby Boomers (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011). Managers and employers would do well to understand how to take advantage of Millennials' talents and skills (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011).

**Criticisms and Stereotypes.** Rikleen (2014) states several criticisms of Millennials by Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X (or Gen Xers, those born between 1965 and 1979). Members of these older generations tend to concur with the perception that Millennials see themselves as entitled and that they may demand promotions and raises regardless of their efforts. Baby Boomers and Gen Xers tend to believe Millennials do not seem to work hard and do not always know what good work is.



Caraher (2015) concurs with Rikleen (2014) and adds additional criticisms of Millennials by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. Older workers tend to believe Millennials do not seem to get anything done. Millennials appear to have the reputation for expecting rewards and promotions for merely showing up and may leave a job after a short period if they do not get what they want. Millennials appear to have the reputation for being casual and disrespectful. Another study seems to indicate that it may be difficult to make Millennials happy; they tend to be unreasonable, often want the newest gadgets, seem to want to work three-hour days at full pay and to bring their pet, parents or both to work every day; and they do not seem to understand how business works (Deal & Levenson, 2016). These negative stereotypes may promote the disconnection between Millennials and older generations of workers. Rikleen (2014) concludes that seeing beyond slanderous characterizations of Millennials may positively transform the workplace.

**What Millennials Want.** Meaningful work may be a key factor in the recruitment of Millennials (Rikleen, 2014). Millennials may find work meaningful when their employers are open to implementing their suggestions and when the work the organization does has a global or community impact (Ackerman, 2013). Millennials tend to view business positively and as behaving in an increasingly responsible manner; but, Millennials may also believe business is not fully realizing its potential to alleviate society's biggest challenges (Deloitte, 2017). Deal and Levenson (2016) found Millennials want to be happy and effective at work. They seem to want to do interesting work with people they enjoy, for which they are well paid, and still have enough time to live their lives as well as work (Deal & Levenson, 2016).

Caraher (2015) claims Millennials tend to want to hear how the company makes a positive difference. They seem to want their company to actively engage in helping the community around them and to help worthy organizations. Millennials seem to want to feel part of a great team. Millennials seem to want to know how and why everything they do is tied to the mission of the team and company. They seem to want leaders to over-communicate the purpose of their project and how each team member will contribute. They seem to want to know how their specific role fits into the bigger picture. Millennials seem to want to matter through meaningful work and by being heard. They appear to see themselves as confident, capable contributors and change makers. They seem to want constant dialogue expressing appreciation and acknowledgement, feedback, and transparency. Finally, Caraher (2015) states Millennials may want opportunity through access to senior management, a strong mentor, and a defined career path.

Millennials' use of technology seems to set them apart from older generations (PwC, 2011). Millennials grew up with digital technology and seem completely at home with it (Rikleen, 2014). They appear to expect instant access to data having grown up with broadband, Smartphones, laptops and social media being the norm (PwC, 2011). Millennials' use of technology may allow for the work flexibility they desire. Compared to more senior workers, Millennials seem to have a better grasp on technology upon entering the workforce (PwC, 2011).

Millennials appear to have different expectations about work than their predecessors (Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2016). Millennials seem to reject the workaholic lifestyle of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers and appear to seek authentic work-life balance (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011; Caraher, 2015; Rikleen, 2014). Millennials

appear to be conditioned to want all the things older generations seem to want from work (Caraher, 2015). They appear to have been taught to expect certain conditions *immediately* that older workers had to wait for (Caraher, 2015). How Millennials find meaningfulness at work may not be so different from how other generations find meaningfulness at work.

### **Leadership Hindrances to Meaningfulness at Work**

While there is much scholarship on cultivating the perception of meaningfulness at work, there seems to be far less regarding detractors of meaningfulness. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) state clear hindrances to meaningfulness at work. They emphasize that the motivation underlying cultivating meaningfulness at work practices appears to be critical. They advise that integrity rather than manipulation should be the underlying motivation to avoid disillusionment, alienation and turnover. Community-building efforts should not be covert attempts to create productivity and profit because employees may view such attempts with skepticism and, eventually, cynicism. The result may be an even more alienating work environment. Fostering transcendence in the work place when individuals seek transcendence outside of the workplace may alienate some workers. According to Pratt and Ashforth (2003) leaders would do well to be authentic in their efforts to cultivate meaningfulness at work.

Amabile and Kramer (2012) add to this understanding by suggesting four traps leaders fall into that likely hinder meaningfulness at work. First may be “mediocrity signals.” Having a high purpose for the organization may be thwarted if management signals the opposite through their words and actions. Second may be having “strategic attention deficit disorder.” This is when top managers start and abandon initiatives so

frequently that they appear to display a kind of attention deficit disorder (ADD) when it comes to strategy and tactics. Third may be “Corporate Keystone Cops.” Keystone Cops are fictional policemen so incompetent they became synonymous with mis-coordination. Lack of coordination and support from leaders makes it difficult for employees to maintain a sense of purpose. The fourth trap may be “misbegotten big, hairy audacious goals or BHAG.” This is when the goals of the company are so extreme as to seem unattainable, so vague as to be empty and fail to contain any relevance or meaning for people in the trenches.

Bailey and Madden (2016) undertook an extensive review of the literature on meaningful work from various fields, including psychology, management studies, sociology and ethics. They interviewed 135 individuals in different occupations and asked when they found their work meaningful or meaningless. They found that meaninglessness at work is often a result of how employees are treated. Bailey and Madden (2016) described “7 Deadly Sins of Meaninglessness” that served as a framework for how to think of meaninglessness at work in this study. Below are their seven hindrances to the perception of meaningfulness at work from least to most egregious:

1.     **Disconnection from values**, especially the tension between an organizational focus on the bottom line and the individual’s focus on the quality of professionalism of work;
2.     **Being taken for granted**, especially lack of recognition for hard work feeling unrecognized, unacknowledged, and unappreciated by line or senior managers;

3. **Being given pointless work;** tasks that did not fit the sense of what the job *should* involve and how the individual *should* be spending their time;
4. **Unfairness** such as distributive injustice, i.e., not being paid fairly, and procedural injustice, e.g., bullying and lack of opportunities for career progression;
5. **Better judgment overridden;** disempowerment or disenfranchisement over how work was done; not being listened to, disregarding the individuals' opinions and experience, not having a voice;
6. **Disconnection from supportive relationships;** feelings of isolation or marginalization through deliberate ostracism on the part of managers or from disconnection from co-workers and teams; loneliness; and
7. **Unnecessary risk of physical or emotional harm;** it is the *unnecessary* exposure to risk of physical or emotional harm that may lead to a loss of meaningfulness.

### **How Leaders Support Meaningfulness at Work**

There is a great deal of literature regarding meaning and meaningfulness at work (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). The challenge for leaders may be to create an environment conducive to meaningfulness (Bailey & Madden, 2016). Leaders may be more effective at influencing the work and its context rather than the self, others and spiritual life (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Employee fit and alignment seem to underlie organization practices to create meaningfulness at work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Leaders may foster inclusion by onboarding new employees and new team members

deliberately, taking the time to explain the company vision and values and how the individual can make a difference (Caraher, 2015).

Pratt and Ashforth (2003) offer many suggestions for leaders to create meaningfulness at work. They suggest that organizations can facilitate the creation of meaningful work by influencing those factors that positively influence worker identity. Leaders may create meaningfulness at work through community building. Two ways to build community at work may be: (1) creating family-like dynamics at work, and (2) emphasizing a mission focused on goals and values beyond simple profit. Finally, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) conclude that organizations may succeed in community building by recognizing that beyond the role, the employee is a flesh and blood person who has a life outside of work.

### **Family-like Dynamics**

To the extent organizations create close-knit, family-like dynamics among members, employees may experience their work as meaningful (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Leaders may make work more family-like by fostering respect, solidarity, and cohesion (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). The implication is that there seems to be a relationship between the employee and the organization regarding commitment and engagement (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009).

Leaders may show a more caring attitude by “encouraging trust and openness, demonstrating personalized attention and humor, self-disclosing, displaying inclusiveness and compassion, tolerating honest mistakes, providing instrumental and expressive support, and engaging in social rituals,” (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003, p. 318). This may be

accomplished by inviting family members to participate in company social events or helping when a family is in need (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

### **Mission Beyond Profit**

Meaningfulness at work may be cultivated with an organization mission that has goals and values beyond profit (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), such as environmental conservancy, community outreach or service. Businesses may provide opportunities for Millennials to engage in “good causes,” which may help young professionals to feel empowered while reinforcing positive associations between the businesses’ activities and social impact (Deloitte, 2017). Leaders can help Millennials find meaning by frequently communicating the vision for the company, team and the individual (Caraher, 2015).

### **Mechanisms of Meaning**

Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) undertook an extensive review of meaning of work literature. They appeared to move scholarship in this area forward by imposing structure on meaning of work literature. They identified sources of meaning and meaningfulness (the self, others, the work and its context, and spiritual life), showed mechanisms “underlying psychological and social processes through which work takes on meaning or is perceived as meaningful,” (p. 94) and offered a “theoretical framework for the main pathways to meaningful work,” (p. 94). The mechanisms of meaning are the how’s and why’s of observed relationships. Their mechanisms of meaning provided structure for this research project. Rosso and colleagues’ (2010) quoted definitions of the mechanisms of meaning are below:

- **Authenticity:** a sense of coherence or alignment between one's behavior and perceptions of the "true" self (p. 108).
  - **Self-concordance:** the degree to which people believe they are behaving consistently with their interests and values (p. 109).

- **Identity-affirmation:** the verification, affirmation, or activation of valued personal identities through work (p. 109).
- **Personal engagement:** meaningfulness derived from feeling personally immersed and alive in the experience of working (p. 109).
- **Self-efficacy:** individuals' beliefs that they have the power and ability to produce an intended effect or to make a difference; sense of control over one's environment (p. 109).
  - **Control/Autonomy:** capable of exercising free choice and effectively managing their own activities or environments (self-determining); agentic actors (p. 109).
  - **Competence:** successfully overcoming challenges in one's work (p. 110).
  - **Perceived Impact:** individuals' perception they are making a difference or having a positive impact on their organizations, work groups, coworkers, or other entities beyond the self (p. 110).
- **Self-esteem:** an individual's assessment or evaluation of his or her own self-worth; sense of oneself as worthwhile (p. 110).
- **Purpose:** a sense of directedness and intentionality in life (p. 110).
  - **Significance:** perceptions of the significance of individual's work (p. 111).
  - **Value Systems:** a set of consistent values shared by a group of people (p. 111).
- **Belongingness:** a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships; experiencing a positive sense of shared common identity, fate, or humanity with others (p. 111).
  - **Social Identification:** identifying with a desirable social group (p. 111).
  - **Interpersonal Connectedness:** interpersonal closeness that is comforting and supportive (p. 112).
- **Transcendence:** connecting or superseding the ego to an entity greater than the self or beyond the material world (p. 112).
  - **Interconnection:** connecting or contributing to something outside or greater than the tangible self (p. 112).
  - **Self-abnegation:** deliberately subordinating oneself to something external to and/or larger than the self (p. 112).
- **Cultural and Interpersonal Sensemaking:** understanding how different types of work meaning are constructed (p. 112).

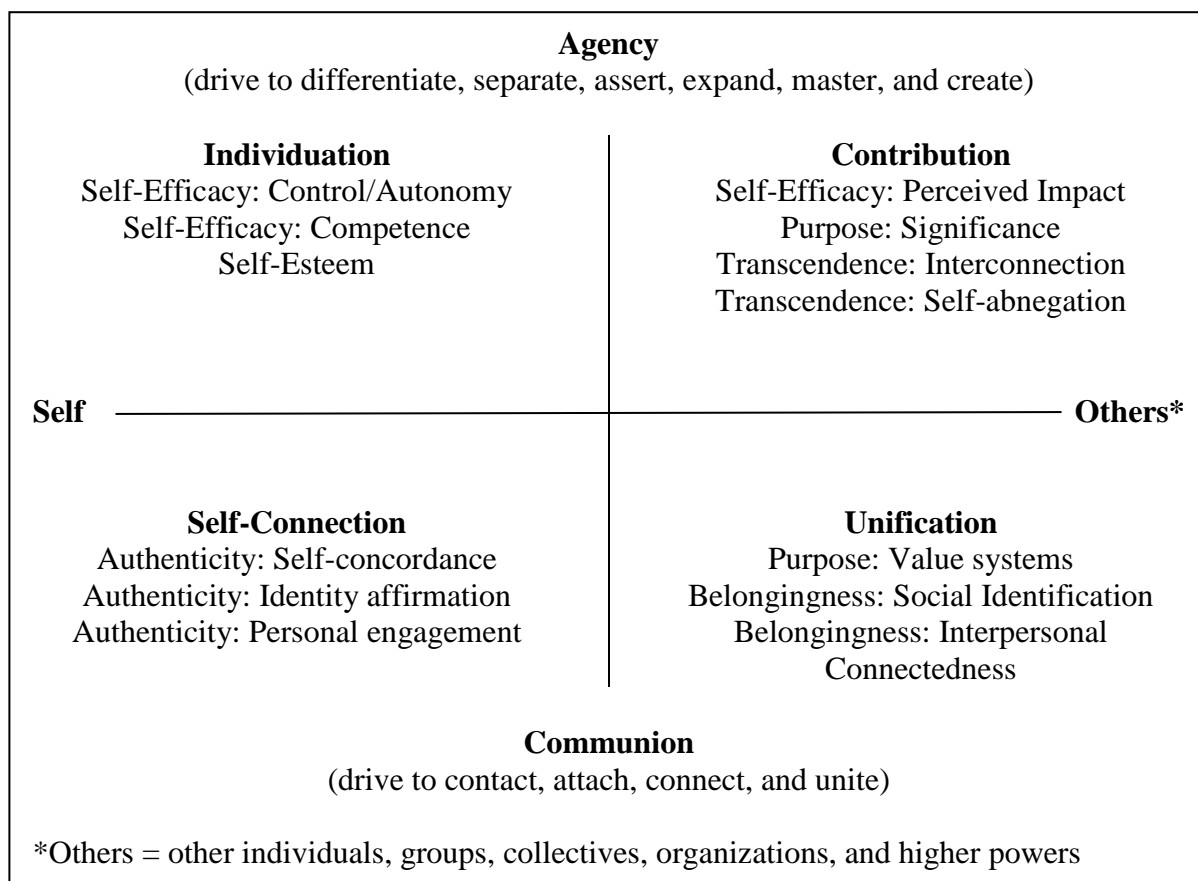
The last mechanism of meaning, *Cultural and Interpersonal Sensemaking*, largely concerns the production of meaning rather than meaningfulness and how different types of work meaning are constructed while the other mechanisms of meaning are



psychological processes (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). This particular mechanism will not be used in analyzing how Millennials find meaningfulness at work.

### **Pathways to Meaning**

In their seminal study on meaning and meaningfulness, Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) provided a theoretical framework for pathways to meaningfulness at work. They argued that “two key dimensions seem most fundamental to the creation or maintenance of meaningful work,” (p. 113) namely, the Agency to Communion spectrum and the Self to Others spectrum. Agency is the human drive to “separate, assert, expand, master and create,” (p. 114). Communion is the human drive to “contact, attach, connect, and unite,” (p. 114). Self to Others is whether action is directed toward the self or toward others, both of which can be experienced as meaningful. Figure 1 organizes the psychological mechanisms of meaningfulness and “shows how each mechanism fits coherently into these categories, suggesting that there is something fundamentally significant about the nature of these four pathways that is common to many sources of meaning” (p. 115). Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) name the four pathways to meaningfulness as individuation, contribution, self-connection, and unification. Individuation reflects the meaningfulness of actions that define and distinguish the self as valuable and worthy. Contribution reflects the meaningfulness of actions perceived as significant and/or done in service of something greater than the self. Self-connection reflects the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals closer into alignment with the way they see themselves. Unification reflects the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals into harmony with other beings or principles.

**Figure 1*****Four Major Pathways to Meaningful Work: A Theoretical Framework***

(Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010)

**Conclusions**

Millennials may be difficult to manage because of their high expectations for work upon entering the workforce. Ultimately, it is likely that Millennials want the same thing workers of all ages want: to do interesting work with people they enjoy, for which they are well paid, and still have enough time to live their lives as well as work. So much of meaning creation may be up to the individual. The best leaders can do may be to avoid hindering meaningfulness through their actions or inactions and create an environment

conducive to meaningfulness. Psychological mechanisms of meaning underlie pathways to meaningfulness; these provided the framework for this research project.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter describes the methodology used for this research project. It begins with a restatement of the research purpose, followed by a description of the research method and research setting. The nature of the research and theoretical framework and data analysis are also covered. The chapter ends with a description of the validity process, definition of terms, and assumptions and limitations.

#### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis and action research project was to explore how Millennials at a small business find meaningfulness at work and to what extent their leaders create or hinder an environment of meaningfulness. This action research project was designed to answer three questions:

1. How do Millennials find meaningfulness at work?
2. What actions do small business leaders take or fail to take that diminish a perception of meaningfulness at work for Millennials?
3. How have small business leaders been successful at creating an environment supportive of meaningfulness at work for Millennials?

With an ostensibly growing Millennial population in the workforce, their different expectations about work, and employers' need to fully harness the skills and energy of the workforce to remain competitive, how can the workplace become more meaningful for Millennials? What are the most common psychological mechanisms of meaning for Millennials? What pathways to meaningfulness do Millennials use most?

## Research Method

This qualitative research project explored participant attitudes, opinions and beliefs about meaningfulness at work through one-on-one interviews. A qualitative research method was selected for this research project because qualitative methods allow continued exploration of topics that have not been fully researched or about which there is scarce literature (Creswell, 2014). While there is substantive research on meaningfulness at work and on Millennials separately, there is little research on Millennials' perspectives on meaningfulness at work. The interviews were conducted with Millennials. The interview used open-ended questions to illicit recollections about past experiences. Preliminary interview questions were:

1. How do you find meaningfulness at work? Can you give an example of that?
2. Recall a time when your work felt meaningless. Something happened that made you feel there was no point in coming to work. Describe that. What was management's stance in this situation?
3. Recall a time when you found your work particularly meaningful. Something happened that made you feel glad you were at work doing what you do. Describe that. Was there anything management did to foster that meaningfulness?

The specific order of the questions (with anticipated positive, negative, and positive responses, respectively) was chosen so that interviews would likely end on a positive note and participants returned to work in a positive state of mind.

## **Research Setting**

The participants interviewed were Millennials employed at a Professional Employer Organization (PEO), a small business headquartered in Honolulu, Hawaii. It also has an administrative office in Boulder, Colorado. The PEO serves a family of Native Hawaiian-owned companies. It is responsible for business functions, including human resources, information technology, and payroll and accounting, for at least eight other companies and a dozen or so joint ventures. PEO employees are distributed generationally almost equally:

- 8 in the Millennial Generation (those born between 1980 and 2000);
- Ten in Generation X (or Gen X, those born between 1965 and 1979); and
- Twelve in the Baby Boomer Generation (those born between 1946 and 1964).

A company roster was generated to determine the employees born between 1980 and 2000, which puts them in the Millennial Generation age category. Millennial employees were then contacted in-person, by phone or email and asked if they wished to voluntarily participate in an interview as research for the researcher's master's thesis on Millennials and meaningfulness at work. Appendix A contains a copy of the request to participants. The researcher is part of the management team at the PEO. Because of her role in human resources management and recruiting, the researcher had established rapport with each of the participants prior to the interview, but not to the same degree with each.

Participants were informed that the data collected would not be discussed with other company management and used only for purposes of this research project. They

were also informed that the interviews were, by necessity, no longer than 30 minutes because of their work obligations. The intent was to mitigate time away from work. Interview questions were provided ahead of time to give the participants time to consider their responses and to keep the interview periods brief.

Interviews were conducted in a company conference room during business hours. If the participant was in Honolulu, where the researcher resides, the interview was conducted in person. If the participant was in Boulder, phone interviews were conducted. Responses to the open-ended interview questions were recorded and transcribed. Participants were each offered a copy of the findings upon completion and each accepted the offer.

### **Nature of the Research and Theoretical Framework**

This research project was developed to confirm and expand on previous literature regarding how meaningfulness at work is fostered and hindered and adds the component of Millennials' experiences of meaningfulness at work. The research questions were intended to add to the body of knowledge on how to successfully work with and manage Millennials. The project is qualitative research and will be analyzed for themes from participants' subjective responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Recordings of interviews were transcribed by a third-party transcription service, excerpts of which are in Appendices B, C and D for responses to Questions 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Transcriptions were reviewed for a general sense of the material. The transcriptions were then coded and categorized into themes. Codes for Questions 1 and 3 were based on the psychological mechanisms of meaning and pathways to meaning

codified by Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010). Codes for Question 2 were taken from the seven hindrances to the perception of meaningfulness at work listed by Bailey and Madden (2016). Findings will be conveyed in a narrative passage. Considering lessons learned will be the last step in data analysis (Creswell, 2014).

### **Validity**

Accuracy of the qualitative data was enhanced with peer debriefing. Two members of the cohort who are familiar with the researcher and this research project reviewed the data and analysis and presented questions so that “the account will resonate with people other than the researcher,” (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). A third debrief was conducted with the researcher’s family member who has written three theses in fulfillment of his own master’s degrees. Significant changes to the data analysis were made after preliminary debriefs.

### **Definition of Terms**

For purposes of this research project, meaningfulness at work is the significance of the organization’s culture, ideology, leadership and community (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) as opposed to the meaningfulness found *in* work through sensemaking of or loyalty to an occupation or having a calling (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Millennials are defined as those in the workforce born between 1980 and 2000. Small business is an organization with fewer than 500 employees. Mechanisms of meaning are the “underlying psychological and social processes through which work takes on meaning or is perceived as meaningful” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 94), as more fully described in the literature review. Pathways to meaningfulness are ways meaningfulness is found, through agency,



communion, self and others (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010), also more fully described in the literature review.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the methodology used for this research project. It began with a restatement of the research purpose, followed by a description of the research method and research setting. The nature of the research and theoretical framework and data analysis were also covered. The chapter ended with a description of the validity process, definition of terms, and assumptions and limitations.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

The purpose of this thesis and action research project was to explore how Millennials at a small business find meaningfulness at work and to what extent their leaders create or hinder an environment of meaningfulness. This action research project was designed to answer three questions:

1. How do Millennials find meaningfulness at work?
2. What actions do small business leaders take or fail to take that diminish a perception of meaningfulness at work for Millennials?
3. How have small business leaders been successful at creating an environment supportive of meaningfulness at work for Millennials?

The purpose of this chapter is to cover the results of the research. Participant demographics are presented first, followed by findings for each of the research questions.

### **Participant Demographics**

Of the eight Millennials at the company, all eight volunteered to be interviewed. There were two participants in Boulder and six participants in Honolulu. Five participants were female and three were male. Their ages ranged from 23 to 35 years old. Their occupation categories were in accounting, information technology, and human resources. They each worked at least 40 hours per week. Six of the participants have bachelor's degrees in their field. The two participants without bachelor's degrees have some college or specialized training certificates in their field. One participant has multiple master's degrees. Tables 1 and 2 show the demographics of the participants by age and years of service, respectively.

**Table 1*****Participant Demographics by Age***

<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of Service</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Location</b>
35	5	Male	Hawaii
35	5	Female	Hawaii
35	4	Female	Hawaii
32	7	Female	Hawaii
31	1	Male	Hawaii
28	2	Female	Colorado
28	<1	Female	Hawaii
23	<1	Male	Colorado

**Table 2*****Participant Demographics by Years of Service***

<b>Years of Service</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Location</b>
7	32	Female	Hawaii
5	35	Male	Hawaii
5	35	Female	Hawaii
4	35	Female	Hawaii
2	28	Female	Colorado
1	31	Male	Hawaii
<1	28	Female	Hawaii
<1	23	Male	Colorado

It is interesting to note that Millennials have a reputation for not remaining with a company more than 18 to 36 months. Half the participants had been with the PEO more than 48 months. There were no discernible differences in responses by demographic feature.

### Mechanisms of Meaning

Participants were asked how they found meaningfulness at work and to give an example of that. Table 3 shows mechanisms of meaning and the number of participants who mentioned that mechanism. More than half the participants spoke about self-efficacy, belongingness and authenticity.

**Table 3**

*Mechanisms of Meaning*

Mechanism	n
Self-efficacy (n = 8)	
Control/Autonomy	1
Competence	8
Perceived Impact	6
Belongingness (n = 7)	
Social Identification	1
Interpersonal Connectedness	7
Authenticity (n = 6)	
Self-concordance	6
Identity-affirmation	0
Personal Engagement	1
Transcendence (n = 3)	
Interconnection	3
Self-abnegation	1
Purpose (n = 2)	
Significance	1
Value Systems	1
Self-esteem (n = 1)	1

N = 8

Each of the eight respondents mentioned in some way their beliefs that they have the power and ability to produce an intended effect or to make a difference, i.e., self-efficacy. One participant said, “I think being able to take pride in my work, doing a good

job to my standards, and then also seeing that recognized by my coworkers and by management,” which was a sentiment echoed by all the participants. Having a sense of competence and successfully overcoming challenges at work appeared to be particularly meaningful. Participants’ perceived impact seemed to make work meaningful. It appears that work was more meaningful when participants felt they were making a difference or having a positive impact on the organizations, work groups, or coworkers.

Seven of the eight participants mentioned meaningfulness at work through belongingness. They appeared to have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships at work. Relationships with coworkers were mentioned more than with leaders but relationships with leaders also seemed important for a sense of belongingness and meaningfulness. A sentiment heard multiple times was that relationships with coworkers are “a really big thing” or that “community is really important to me.”

Authenticity was mentioned by six out of eight participants, that sense of coherence or alignment between their behavior and their perceptions of their “true” self. Self-concordance, or the degree to which they believed they were behaving consistently with their interests and values, appeared to make work more meaningful. These Millennials seem to want the freedom to grow and improve.

Transcendence, purpose and self-esteem were also mentioned by at least one participant. A noteworthy contributor to meaningfulness appears to be interconnection, i.e., contributing to something outside of or greater than the tangible self. Three out of eight participants mentioned “doing good” for the community and for the environment as a source of meaningfulness.

### **Hindrances to Meaningfulness**

For the second question, participants were asked to describe a time when their work felt meaningless and the degree of management's contribution to their perception of meaninglessness at work. Seven hindrances to meaningfulness taken from the literature review and numbers of participants mentioning each are listed in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Hindrances to Meaningfulness*

Hindrance	n
Being taken for granted	5
Unfairness	4
Better judgment overridden	3
Feelings of isolation or marginalization	3
Disconnection from values	2
Being given pointless work	2
Unnecessary risk of physical or emotional harm	0

N = 8

Five out of eight participants said being taken for granted was a hindrance to meaningfulness. One participant talked about receiving verbal appreciation from their immediate supervisor but not from any executives in the company for a \$30,000 refund to the company obtained because of their diligence. This participant was also the one called in the middle of the night to address an issue outside of his department and beyond the scope of their job every time the issue occurs. They received no extra pay for responding to this recurring issue. Another participant left a prior employer because they did not feel their work and contributions were appreciated despite “going above and beyond and keeping that place afloat.” Lack of recognition for hard work, feeling unrecognized,

unacknowledged, and unappreciated by line or senior managers appears to be a significant hindrance to meaningfulness at work.

Half the participants experienced unfairness as a contributor to the perception of meaninglessness at work. One participant felt their work was meaningless when their earnest efforts to be honest, trustworthy, and reliable were not reciprocated. Another participant felt it was unfair to be given a poor performance review when it was too late to do anything about it. The expectation to perform work beyond the scope of the job also appears to be seen as unfair and a hindrance to meaningfulness at work.

Three out of eight participants appear to perceive work as meaningless when their better judgment was overridden, when they were disempowered over how work was done, when their opinions and experience were disregarded, or when they felt they did not have a voice. One participant said work became meaningless “when management or supervisors constrict me and [do] not allow me to exceed the regular day-to-day tasks.”

Feelings of isolation or marginalization were named by three out of eight participants as a hindrance to meaningfulness at work. They talked about not getting support from the team, coworkers not communicating directly with them, and being confined to their “little space” without the opportunity to look around to understand where to direct people.

Two participants out of eight appeared to feel work was less meaningful when work disconnected them from their values. Two participants out of eight appeared to feel work was less meaningful when they were given pointless work to do. None of the participants mentioned an experience of unnecessary risk of physical or emotional harm.

### Pathways to Meaningfulness

For the third question, participants were asked to describe a time when their work felt particularly meaningful and the degree of management's contribution to their perception of meaningfulness at work. Pathways to meaningfulness taken from the literature review and participants mentioning mechanisms making up the pathway are listed in Table 5.

**Table 5**

#### *Pathways to Meaningfulness*

Pathway	n
Contribution (n = 7)	
Self-Efficacy: Perceived Impact	7
Purpose: Significance	2
Transcendence: Interconnection	1
Transcendence: Self-abnegation	0
Individuation (n = 6)	
Self-Efficacy: Control/Autonomy	3
Self-Efficacy: Competence	6
Self-esteem	4
Self-Connection (n = 4)	
Authenticity: Self-concordance	1
Authenticity: Identity-affirmation	2
Authenticity: Personal Engagement	1
Unification (n = 3)	
Purpose: Value Systems	1
Belongingness: Social Identification	1
Belongingness: Interpersonal Connectedness	3

N = 8

Seven out of eight participants seemed to experience contribution as a pathway to meaningfulness. Contribution reflects the meaningfulness of actions perceived as



significant and/or done in service of something greater than the self. Perceived impact seemed to weigh most heavily in this perception of meaningfulness at work with seven out of eight participants mentioning the importance of the impact of their actions.

Participants appeared to experience meaningfulness at work when they perceived that their work made a difference. Solving problems that have a positive impact on the company and coworkers, regardless of their generational cohort, seemed meaningful to participants. One participant was successful getting \$30,000 refunded to the company through their own initiative and investigation. They said it felt like “self-fulfillment...it just felt good.”

Individuation reflects the meaningfulness of actions that define and distinguish the self as valuable and worthy. Six participants mentioned individuation as a pathway to meaningfulness. Competence was mentioned by six out of eight participants as a mechanism underlying this pathway to meaningfulness. One participant said, “I think management has a big part of it... seeing my potential and knowing that I have the capabilities, have the knowledge to be able to do things and to have the confidence in me to assign me something. I take it and run with it.” Self-esteem was mentioned by four out of eight participants and three out of eight mentioned control or autonomy in the workplace. Participants appear to find meaningfulness at work when they feel smart, feel good and feel in control.

Self-connection reflects the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals closer into alignment with the way they see themselves. Half the participants mentioned this pathway to meaningfulness, with two mentioning identity-affirmation as a meaning

mechanism to this pathway. Having their identity as a professional confirmed seemed to be meaningful.

Unification reflects the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals into harmony with other beings or principles. Three out of eight participants mentioned unification. All three of these participants mentioned interpersonal connectedness as a meaning mechanism to this pathway. Interpersonal closeness that is comforting and supportive appears to be important for these participants to perceive meaningfulness at work.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of the research. Self-efficacy and competence appear to be how participants most often experienced meaning. Being taken for granted appears to be how most participants experienced meaninglessness. Contribution appears to be the most traveled pathway for meaningfulness at work for these participants.

## Chapter 5: Key Findings and Recommendations

The purpose of this thesis and action research project was to explore how Millennials at a small business find meaningfulness at work and to what extent their leaders create or hinder an environment of meaningfulness. This action research project was designed to answer three questions:

1. How do Millennials find meaningfulness at work?
2. What actions do small business leaders take or fail to take that diminish a perception of meaningfulness at work for Millennials?
3. How have small business leaders been successful at creating an environment supportive of meaningfulness at work for Millennials?

This chapter presents key findings, provides recommendations for small business leaders, acknowledges assumptions and limitations, and concludes with suggestions for further research.

### Key Findings

The literature review provided an effective framework to organize research data gathered in interviews. Participant responses fit easily into meaning mechanism, hindrance to meaning, and pathways to meaning categories, which appears to validate the research of meaningfulness at work scholars.

***Finding #1.*** In this research project, how Millennials find meaningfulness appeared to be in recognition of their competence and perceived impact, interpersonal connectedness, and self-concordance. Those interviewed seemed to work hard to gain expertise in their profession, applied what they know and appeared to accomplish quite a lot. They seemed to strive to have a positive impact on their organizations and coworkers.

These findings appear to contradict the common notion that Millennials cannot get anything done. Relationships at work seemed to make work more meaningful for Millennials interviewed. It appeared their identity is tied to their professionalism. These mechanisms seem to be how Millennials in this study find meaningfulness at work.

***Finding #2.*** Being taken for granted and unfairness appeared to be significant hindrances to the perception of meaningfulness at work for Millennials in this study. Even though both hindrances rate relatively low on the hindrance to meaningfulness scale of egregiousness, Millennials in this study appear to have found them to be top factors to a diminished sense of meaningfulness at work, which appears to contradict the common notion that they see themselves as entitled. These Millennials' eagerness was an attribute evidenced in their interviews. They seemed eager to work hard and do an excellent job despite possibly being taken advantage of and despite their apparent experience of unfairness. They seemed to want to find meaningfulness at work and they appeared to seek it however difficult.

***Finding #3.*** Meaningfulness at work for Millennials appears to happen when their contributions have a positive impact on the organization and their multi-generational coworkers. This finding appears to contradict the common criticisms that Millennials do not seem to work hard, appear to see themselves as entitled, and that they may demand promotions and raises regardless of their efforts. It appears the main pathway for meaningfulness at work for these Millennials is through their contributions.

The criticism and stereotypical derision aimed towards Millennials for their expectations about work seems misplaced. Perhaps their youthful eagerness and energy is an affront to world-weary older generations. Learning about what is meaningful to

Millennials gives this researcher a heightened respect for Millennials and hopefulness for our future. If other Millennials are as intelligent, conscientious and eager to contribute as the Millennials in this research project appear to be, the world is in good hands.

### **Recommendations for Small Business Leaders**

***Recommendation #1.*** Leaders would do well to pay attention to the good Millennials do and tell them they noticed. Recognize Millennials privately and publicly and show appreciation for what they do. Organize and promote interpersonal relationships at work through lunch-and-learns, walk-and-talks or after-work gatherings. Pay Millennials commensurate with their contributions to the organization.

***Recommendation #2.*** Leaders would do well to make use of Millennials' willingness to work hard, but avoid taking advantage of them. Find the right balance between workplace demands and employee capacity. Work-life balance appears to be important to Millennials in this study. They seem willing to work extra hours to meet deadlines, but they may not tolerate abuse for long. Leaders would do well to be fair in how they treat Millennials.

***Recommendation #3.*** Leaders would do well to encourage Millennials' desire to contribute, not just the work they do but also beyond their immediate tasks. Millennials in this study seemed to want to suggest innovations and ideas that can improve work processes and organizational performance. Encouraging their ideas may also be a form of showing appreciation for their contributions. Leaders could provide Millennials with specific opportunities to contribute and suggestions for areas where their contributions would be helpful and relevant.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

Based on literature reviewed for this project, this research assumed meaningfulness at work is a primary factor for the success and well-being of an organization and its workforce. The outcome of this research project was limited by participants' willingness to provide honest feedback to open-ended questions regarding meaningfulness at work.

This research is based on the Millennials' perspectives of meaningfulness at work and to what extent their leaders hinder or create the perception of meaningfulness at work. Leaders at the PEO had not been directed to implement a program of meaning-creation at work. Additionally, meaning-creation is not part of espoused company ideology or management intention. Additional research would be required for a larger population sample outside of Honolulu and Boulder.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The areas of meaningfulness at work and Millennials may be rich for further research. As Millennials grow into more management roles, it would be interesting to discover their perceptions of managing other Millennials and subsequent generations. Would they be as open to listening to and empowering a younger generation as they would have wanted to be listened to and empowered when they entered the workforce? What challenges will they face with managing younger generations? What would their recommendations be for managing younger generations?

The sources of meaning, and mechanisms and pathways to meaningfulness framework presented in the literature review seem to provide clarity to this area of research that had been missing until Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010). Research

using this framework to study meaningfulness at work for other groups could yield insight into what is meaningful to them. With apparent economic pressure for businesses to provide more with less, understanding a no-cost or low-cost way to foster meaningfulness at work could help many populations in a variety of industries. The set of psychological needs covered in the meaning mechanisms in this research, may not be an exhaustive list. What other psychological needs can be determined to be commonly meaningful?

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented key findings on meaningfulness at work for Millennials and provided recommendations for small business leaders. It also acknowledged assumptions and limitations of this research project and made suggestions for further research. Though the sample size for this research was limited, the results have led to reasonable recommendations to small business leaders to foster an environment of meaningfulness for Millennials.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol Sample**

## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol Sample**

Hi, \_\_\_\_\_,

The Millennial Generation is an important segment of our workforce - that's you! For my master's thesis, I'm conducting research on Millennials and their thoughts about meaningfulness at work. Would you be willing to let me interview you for my project? It should require only 20 minutes or so. The aim of this study is to explore how Millennials find meaningfulness at work and to what extent leaders create an environment of meaningfulness.

(Manager's name) is aware of this research project. S/he did not object to your participation. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any question for any reason. Your responses will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated to the content of any final summary.

If you are willing to be interviewed, please let me know when you are available next week. Your involvement and input would be of great value! Here are my interview questions:

- 1) How do you find meaningfulness at work? Can you give an example of that?
- 2) Recall a time when your work felt meaningless. Something happened that made you feel there was no point in coming to work. Describe that. What was management's stance in this situation?
- 3) Recall a time when you found your work particularly meaningful. Something happened that made you feel glad you were at work doing what you do. Describe that. Was there anything management did to foster that meaningfulness?

If you have any questions, let me know. Thanks, \_\_\_\_\_. Talk soon!

**Appendix B: Question 1 Responses**

### Appendix B: Question 1 Responses

Question 1: How do you find meaningfulness at work?	Participant
It's meaningful when it's challenging because to me, it says I'm putting forth effort and so I feel that I'm truly earning what I am being paid.	1
[I]t's important to just have a good attitude and remember to look for opportunities., but also while you're looking for opportunities to be sure that you're delivering what you agreed	1
Community is really important to me as an individual	1
[I]t's really important to me that my contributions benefit everyone involved	1
Not only to be better because of it, but to recognize that it is my intention to help nourish and grow and offer support.	1
I felt like I could really come over here and help how I like to help and get my hands on lots of things, get that experience that I want, but grow happily. There isn't any resistance to my growth.	1
The one thing I usually look for when I'm delving into jobs and want to really feel connected and be doing meaningful work is honesty.	2
I seek out jobs where we all have a job to do and we can communicate openly and freely about this and all kind of contribute to the same goal.	2
[T]hat down-to-earth, that honesty, and that ability, that rapport to work with the people around you. My manager is very open and honest with me about things and is willing to have that conversation, is willing to tell me if I'm being incorrect about something, and is willing to help me get that more correct.	2
How much I enjoy work and how much impact I'm making for the company. If I'm enjoying work and I can make a difference, make things productive, make things go faster, smoother, then I'm okay with work.	3
I like seeing my efforts being rewarded by the outcome of what I'm doing for the company as a whole...Most important is I want to enjoy myself too while doing [work].	3

Nothing from upper management. My immediate supervisor was like, "Oh, good job," which was nice. Sometimes compliments are good, too. You can't expect your boss to reward you for everything. It's your job to do stuff. You don't want to get into that mindset, or I don't want to get into the mindset that every good deed comes with a reward. To me, that's why if you enjoy your job and you find stuff you do that you accomplish, you get fulfillment out of it and that should be good enough. Eventually, the good things will happen if you stay with the company long enough. If they appreciate you, you'll see good things. It will show eventually, and if it doesn't after at least 10 years, it's time to go unless you really enjoy your job. Sometimes it's not all about the money. You can't expect, like I said, a reward for everything. If they acknowledge it and whatever, which I got; he said, "Good job," at least he knows what I did. I guess that's it.	3
[M]aking an impact is meaningful.	3
Being recognized for good work is meaningful.	3
I like the direction of the company, too. We're kind of environmental or we're blowing up [hazardous] bombs, but we're doing good for the community as well. I like the mission or the way the company is heading. It was a goal in general. To me, I feel proud when I say I work here. I like what the company's doing, too, so that's fulfilling to me. I can say I'm proud of my job, or my company. I'm not ashamed	3
Either my workplace relationships are going really well or I've achieved something personally that I've been trying to get off my to-do list. Or I've done something, I've achieved it, and somebody recognizes me for it.	4
[Y]ou get to do things together. So it could be a birthday cake lunch, it could be maybe you share a meal every once in a while. scheduling social events is a lot more meaningful if management is supportive of that and you're left at a bit of a loss if you don't feel like you've gotten their support but that they haven't tacitly told you, "No, don't do it".	4
I enjoy being a millennial. I think that we're special people and I think that we get a bad rap for being so enthusiastic about work-life balance, but I think that millennials value time with friends and family and that's a trait that is not so bad. I think that's a good thing.	4

The things that I've found meaningful in work is, I think being able to take pride in my work, doing a good job to my standards, and then also seeing that recognized by my coworkers and by management, that's very helpful. Also, my relationships with my coworkers is a really big thing, because without that, looking back at my past jobs, the best jobs have been the ones where I've had a good relationship with my team. So, I think those are the things. Oh, and also seeing actual results of my work or what the company is doing. Like here, knowing that we're cleaning up bombs, building buildings, helping the environment, that's all helped to make my work here meaningful.	5
I was doing something that was going to not necessarily benefit me myself, but benefit the future generations. That was very meaningful.	6
[W]hat benefits the company? What's going to make the company more efficient? What's going to make things easier for people, and being excited to work with people, learn new things from people. I think that's quite meaningful. I'm excited to see what's going to happen that day, see what new tasks I may get assigned because for me, it isn't the same thing every single day.	6
I think working with people, having that good relationship with somebody. That's meaningful to me, to be able to support the company in that way, too.	6
Honestly, it's very hard for me to find times when I felt things are meaningless. I always try to find the meaning in everything like the things that I do. I've always felt that I'm doing something whether it's small or whether it's doing a lot. There's always been some meaning.	6
I like going above and beyond and finding, taking the initiative to do more than what's required.	6
I try to negotiate and find ways to make things a little bit better and easier for myself. Why do something rote when you can make it faster, make it quicker and engage more people with it?	6
I try to do it so that I leave it better than when I found it.	6
When you touch something at work or do something, get involved with something or a project, I always want to improve it in some way. That's really meaningful to me.	6
To be a good resource for people. I think that means a lot to me. That means a lot because that means that I can be there to support and bring value to other people besides myself.	6



For me, it's learning. I love learning and learning more every day about what I do and how to make myself better, but that's just more personal rather than for at work. I think, I hope that it rolls over into the work that I do.	6
I've definitely learned a lot from certain colleagues and I think it's helped me grow as a person.	7
I've learned a lot and gained a lot of experience and felt accomplishment	7
[U]sing the knowledge I acquired and going to college, getting my Bachelor's Degree that makes it meaningful.	8
[G]etting paid also makes work meaningful; I had the opportunity to go through the ranks and make even more money. More money than you did when you initially started with the company. Having that opportunity helps to make work more meaningful.	8
[M]ake it more meaningful is most people just being generally polite to one another; if people were just nicer to one another, that would be make the workplace environment more meaningful	8

**Appendix C: Question 2 Responses**

### Appendix C: Question 2 Responses

Recall a time when your work felt meaningless. Something happened that made you feel there was no point in coming to work. Describe that. What was management's stance in this situation?	Participant
[Management] didn't want to utilize me...[as] a higher-level accountant. I want to be working in accounting, they wanted to fill my duties with other things that weren't related to accounting. I didn't think...work was fulfilling my personal need to grow professionally.	1
[I]f I feel like I can't contribute to the overall health of the company to make sure the company is healthy in a way that I would run a company and feel comfortable working at, then it's not for me if I can't help with that.	1
I can't just do one thing. I need more. My brain needs more food.	1
I sometimes feel it's difficult to really be myself in a work setting because I don't want to step on somebody's toes accidentally...I haven't been in a lot of places where I can really be authentic. There's kind of a balance between when you're being asked and a time when you can suggest something. You kind of wait for an opportunity.	1
My job didn't come through for me on a [performance] review and a [small raise].	2
[I]f my performance wasn't great, then they probably should have told me that when my performance stopped being so great...in my mind I was going above and beyond and, honestly, keeping that place floating.	2
Being called in the middle of the night to take care of an issue that has nothing to do with my department.	3
Being asked to do work that is not my department.	3
You don't want to be associated with companies like [a big bank] which has a bad reputation for screwing employees and customers over.	3
[W]hen I'm working on something and the energy that I put into it isn't observed by other people.	4
[When others are] trying to find blame when there's an honest and earnest situation that I'm working through, that's when I feel like my work is meaningless. I do put a lot of trust into the relationships that I'm building and I want to be known for being honest and trustworthy and reliable. when I don't get that in return, when it's not reciprocated, that's when I feel like my workplace relationships are not as good as I thought that they would be. I'm not receiving any recognition for the energy that I'm putting in and I'm not receiving what I want to do.	4

I feel really disappointed when people talk about me behind my back. I'm a grown woman. I can certainly handle constructive criticism, absolutely, that's part of life and I'm prepared for that. So when I hear certain things about [me]... it could range anywhere from my schedule, or if my door was open or closed, or even, more recently, about the timeliness of my replies. When I don't hear it firsthand it bothers me in that I want to exemplify what I think a good HR person is and that is, somebody who is approachable, somebody that you can't easily offend, who can handle a lot of problems with grace. That's generally when I feel the worst at work is when people don't give me feedback to my face.	4
I was confined to my little space. I didn't get the opportunity to go and look around, and people would ask me for help and I had no idea where to direct them to. And the people there, I just didn't really get along with everybody. Everyone was nice enough, but just didn't have that connection. So, yeah, there was nothing there to make me want to keep working there. Lack of caring from management. they kind of saw us as temporary workers, so it wasn't really [that] they invested lot of time and effort into us.	5
[W]hen management or supervisors constrict me and not allow me to exceed the regular day-to-day tasks.	6
I think that [would] probably be the toughest times, I guess, when I find maybe not less meaning but less excited-ness about what I was doing. It's when the manager would be like, "Okay, just get this done. Do it this way," and not look outside the box, which that's like what I do when I look at things to make things easier.	6
[A] lot of tasks and the deadlines all in one day and just so much going on that it was very overwhelming and it didn't even make sense to be there because there's just too much for one person to do. I didn't feel like I had the support that I needed. I guess just support from a team of people, that we all should have been working together on certain things.	7
I would say the monotony of the work sometimes.	8
Having a [trainer] who was not good at teaching brought down the level of meaningfulness. How do you not know what that is? You're supposed to be my teacher. And so when it came to that, it brought down the meaningfulness of certain tasks because they don't even know what they're talking about.	8

**Appendix D: Question 3 Responses**

### Appendix D: Question 3 Responses

<b>Question 3: Recall a time when you found your work particularly meaningful. Something happened that made you feel glad you were at work doing what you do. Describe that. Was there anything management did to foster that meaningfulness?</b>	<b>Participant</b>
It makes me feel really good to anticipate the need and be able to help the needs of the company.	1
[T]o actually solve some of the problems and then have everybody else be happy that the problems are solved, that makes me happy.	1
...self-validation. All the things that I've been wanting to do with myself as a professional, I'm finally doing them.	1
...getting kudos all the time for it.	1
[E]verybody is starting to communicate much better.	1
And I went to my boss and he legitimately heard me out and said, "You know, I'm going to see how this plays out. Thanks for your feedback." He watched for a few weeks, just to see it for himself, and did see it for himself, and he took action on it. And it really, I don't think I've ever had that happen before at any of my various jobs, where my opinion was heard to that extent, then externally validated, and then came back to me. My boss thanked me for my insight for that, and that made me feel really good.	2
[O]nce I was going over our cellphone bill and I saw a charge which looked suspicious. I called our rep in accounting, the vendors. I was able to get refunded like \$30,000 back. I had a direct impact on getting the money back. For me, I guess since I initiated that investigation on my own, I guess it feels a lot better. I don't know, more like self-fulfillment I guess. Yeah, just feels good.	3
I got a salary adjustment which shows that they cared about the work I did by giving me an increase. It shows that they value your work. Once in a great blue moon, you get a bonus. It may not be much, but that shows that they care too. They know your work is being appreciated.	3

Open enrollment was hitting all of my meaningfulness goals so I was seeing people face-to-face, making sure that they know that I'm available, really nurturing those workplace relationships that are important to me. I was knocking things off my list. I was physically getting papers back and crossing them off. It felt really good to achieve. A lot of people sent me emails like, "It was nice to see you. You did a great job. Thanks so much." So just little pats on the back kind of satiated my recognition needs and all in all it was really good time.	4
[W]e were helping these really amazing students. They had these disabilities, but none of them had this victim attitude. They were all, you know, their disabilities helped them to be stronger and want to strive for more. So, being able to help them through their courses and just through daily life being on campus, seeing that was really amazing, number one. The team was also amazing. We all had the same kind of mindset and attitude. So, I think we all got along really well. Everyone was very positive. They had training all set up really well, they got enough staff to keep everybody employed to the amount that they wanted to be, and also to be there to support the disabled students. So, all around it was just a really great atmosphere to be in. We felt like we were making a difference, and it was just all this positive reinforcement in all aspects. The leader, I think that was what made it really awesome. I think her dedication to the cause, and also the gratitude that she felt for everyone, was something that we could always see and feel from her. We made things happen because we saw that, we wanted to be better and to meet her standards, I think. I think that's what she did.	5
[E]veryone is wonderful and supportive. So, yeah, it's that same type of feeling where you can see the people, especially the managers, they're here because this is what they do and you can tell that it's what they enjoy. Seeing them put in long hours and fighting for their people and their projects is really good to see. I really like hearing about all of the projects... There have been a few managers who have taken the time to really get to know me and check in on me, and I really appreciate that they've done that.	5
[I]t's been really nice to have a team with such a great attitude. Where we can all work together and laugh about how crazy whatever we're working on is, but still, we can count on each other to do our parts and to get things done.	5
Joe. That just brought to mind. He always expresses his gratitude to everybody. Even though he's the president and the mastermind behind everything, he's still very humble.	5

These relationships, and feeling appreciated, and interesting things that company's doing to clean the environment and renovate buildings, and keep people safe.	5
I think management has a big part of it. Allowing me, seeing my potential and knowing that I have the capabilities, have the knowledge to be able to do things and to have the confidence in me to assign me something. I take it and run with it. I like that when management gives me that leeway to say, "Okay. Here. I have this problem to be solved," or "I have this task to be done." They've supported me. Having that support, no matter what, from a manager is so important to me. You know, I've had managers where they may or may not have supported me. If something got brought up and it's part of sometimes, it happens. Then, I've had ones that unconditionally, they would support me whatever happened. Whether they heard the whole story or not, they would be behind me. I think that is so important because when I am an employee and I'm working for somebody, all of the things that I do are to help support that manager. You know, it's good to have it go both ways and have no matter what they, you know, they always know that they'll support me. If I'm looking to do something for the company or anything, personally or whatever, they'll be behind me. I think that's knowing that that person is there for you is very important. For me, at least.	6
[T]hat I feel like I'm appreciated and that I put in all of the work and time and hours to get through and tasks done and it's actually noticed and we get that thank you from management. That's very meaningful to me.	7
[I]t would be meaningful to be appreciated in a group setting or just in a little email that says thank you for all of your hard work.	7
[Y]ou gave me that list, had pretty much like bench marks of what should be in that certain amount of time, that made work pretty meaningful, because it gave me something to set my sights on, something to aim for and every time I was able to accomplish one of tasks. Benchmarks with a timeline and when you hit those or hit them faster, then as expected, the work is meaningful to you.	8